

Richard J. Bernstein's
Journey through Philosophy:
'With Friendship and Romance'

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I first met Richard J. Bernstein in the spring of 2009 when I came to the Philosophy Department of The New School for a job talk and campus visit. Before giving my talk (on Spinoza and imagination), I was invited to meet with him for an informal conversation. Coming from the Italian and the German academic systems, I had no idea what to expect, so I entered his office with very tense nerves. Dick welcomed me with a smile and invited me to “Chat and Chew,” what looked like a not too popular venue, but where, he stated, you could eat truly American Food and hear the Brooklyn accent. Instead of food, though, we both ordered tea, while I received an hour of tight questions and subtle arguments about my *Philosophy of Political Myth*. “Why this argument,” and “why that road,” “what else may come out of this work.” Besides the care that he had put into the reading (he could quote footnotes along with their number and pages), I was impressed by that singular combination of kindness, generosity and criticism—lots of it. We passionately debated the difference between myth and religion, and had deep divergencies about the meaning of monotheism. I thought I would never get the job. Little did I know that, in the end, I would get it and that such an intense criticism was actually the best compliment I could have received from him.

In his “The Romance of Philosophy,” Dick states that “the best friendships are those where there is also friendly criticism.”¹ In that lecture, originally given as the John Dewey Lecture at the 103rd Annual Meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, Dick clearly explains the central philosophical role that friendships played in his life. With Rorty, Habermas, Arendt, Gadamer, Derrida, Fraser and Benhabib to mention only the most prominent from that essay. Most of the lecture is actually devoted to showing how, after having discovered the “romance of philosophy” in the long nights of heated conversation with his Chicago fellow students (among whom stood out the “other Richard”, i.e. Rorty), he kept cultivating it through the philosophical friendships that he developed throughout his life: “they have not only been a great sense of joy that has enriched my life, he says, they have also been the occasion for expanding my own philosophical horizons—of listening and learning from them and their texts.”²

In the twelve years I have spent at the New School, Dick has been a friend, a mentor, and, dare I say it, a ‘philosophical friend.’ Before meeting Dick, I always thought of those special relationships through the German term

¹ Richard J. Bernstein, “The Romance of Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 81, no. 2 (November 2007): 117.

² *Ibid.*, 117.

Wahlverwandschaften. After meeting him, I just called them ‘friendship.’ He often made the joke that while German used to be the second language in our department, after hiring Cinzia Arruzza, Simona Forti, and me, Italian had replaced it. He said it so many times (Dick liked to repeat his jokes) that, at times, I took it literally and just started to talk Italian to him for no apparent reason. Even then, he always responded with the same generosity with which he had first welcomed me at The New School. When I landed in NYC, with a family of four, including two small children, Dick invited us to his house in the Adirondacks, gave us hospitality, plenty of advice and even his grandchildren’s clothes, which had been, in turn, those of his own children. He and Carol taught us the Brooklyn accent, the different ways one could pronounce ‘Bernstein’ and the class implications of such a choice, how to translate Hegel for an American audience and how to make pancakes. Ever since, our meetings were always accompanied by a meal, whether it was just the two of us for long philosophical symposia, or with our respective families and friends for long dinners that often ended up with him singing “There once was a union maid” and a chorus of the “International.”

Whenever he published a new book, Dick would bring me a copy with the same dedication: “To Chiara, the best of friends, love, Dick.” It always made me feel very special. I always dwelled on the ‘best,’ but the key term in that dedication was actually ‘friends,’ in the plural. At the memorial on his life and work, I discovered that the room was actually full of people who received the same dedication. Like me, they all felt “very special,” and rightly so. Today, as I hold in my hands the paper copy he gave me of his “The Romance of Philosophy,” I ponder the dedication that carries his small and gracious handwriting, “With friendship and romance, Dick.” I keep reminding myself that, for him, you cannot separate friendship from philosophy, and that in both of them he was a champion of pluralism.

In the following remarks, which I dedicate to him “with friendship and romance,” I will analyze what Richard J. Bernstein meant by the “romance of philosophy,” how the latter unfolded throughout his life, and how it may continue after his death.

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Bernstein explains the term “romance” by commenting on Whitehead’s analysis of the rhythm of education as consisting of three interdependent moments. The stage of the “romance” is the first as it derives from the feeling of novelty, the excitement of “the

sudden perception of half-disclosed and half-hidden possibilities,” something that, Bernstein reminds us, is very close to platonic eros.³ It is followed by “precision,” the stage when our relationship to the subject-matter is characterized by the rigor and exactness of formulations. Last is “generalization,” that is, the stage where one can “return to romanticism with the advantage of classified ideas and relevant technique.”⁴ From Whitehead’s tripartition, it is quite evident why romance is essential to education, in general, and to the life of the mind, in particular: “without romance, Bernstein concludes, precision becomes pedantry, and generalization impossible.”⁵

While reading his work and meditating on his life, friendship and teaching appear indeed as the two driving forces of Bernstein’s romance with philosophy, a romance that, we should add, lasted more than seventy years. As we know, the eros of the first romantic encounters has a magic that is difficult to keep alive, which is why, even the most passionate relationships must face the challenge of routine and repetition and thus the risk of collapsing into boredom. How to make sure that eros does not turn into routine, and that the excitement of the first encounter is nourished and kept alive, even amidst the inevitable routinization that befall any activity that is repeated over time?

One may think here of Max Weber’s analysis of the vocation of the intellectual under modern conditions. A peasant may die full of life, having fulfilled a cycle, the very same cycle of production and reproduction of life that they observe at the turn of every season: the end of a life may thus be the end of cycle, a return to the same point at which one was born. This possibility, however, is never given to those who pursue an intellectual vocation: the (modern) intellectual is constantly exposed to new knowledge, new terrains to explore, without ever possibly reaching a point of saturation and thus completing a cycle and dying satiated, full of life.⁶ While nature fulfills its cycles and gives us a feeling of completion and fullness, the infinite task of culture, particularly under modern conditions, constantly opens up new vistas, new horizons, so that we are destined to remain chained to a rock, like Prometheus, having our liver eaten in the light of day only to regrow it during the night.⁷

³ Ibid., 119.

⁴ Ibid., 118.

⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁶ Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 140.

⁷ On the myth of Prometheus as a symbol of modern subjectivity, see Dimitri D’andrea, *Prometeo ed*

Bernstein's strategy to navigate the romance of philosophy is, however, more Arendtian than Weberian on this point, and thus also more hopeful. For him, the "romance of discovery, where some new problem or thinker opens up unexplored vistas"⁸ is nourished by the constant arrival of new friends and new students: paraphrasing Arendt, we could say that their birth, their coming into Bernstein's life, were the "miracle"⁹ that kept the romance alive despite the passing of time and the routinization forcibly brought about by the increasing bureaucratization of our profession.

It is not by chance, then, that among the many friends explicitly mentioned in his books, the encounter with Arendt is given a special place, both in the 1983 *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, written eight years after her death, and then again in the aforementioned "The Romance of Philosophy" from 2007. It is worth quoting the entire passage:

My first personal encounter with Hannah Arendt in 1972 was stormy. We had a sharp debate about our different interpretations of Hegel and Marx. But that encounter was not only agonistic, it was also, in Plato's sense, erotic. We met several times during the few short remaining years of her life, and each time we passionately argued with each other. She is still very much a living presence for me, and I continue to argue with her.¹⁰

The encounter was "stormy," divergencies arose, also because, as Bernstein admitted: "I had initially scarcely read her work, and what I had read I didn't like, because I

Ulisse. Natura umana ed ordine politico in Thomas Hobbes (Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1997), 29-31 and 76-76. On the link between Prometheus and Max Weber's analysis of the vocation of intellectuals under modern conditions, see Dimitri D'Andrea, *L'incubo degli ultimi uomini. Etica e politica in Max Weber* (Carocci, Roma: 2005).

⁸ Bernstein, "The Romance of Philosophy," 118.

⁹ The reference is from the notorious passage of the *Human Condition* where Hannah Arendt points out that the miracle that can save us is, ultimately, the fact of natality; the birth of new (wo)men that guarantees, ontologically speaking, the possibility of new beginning. "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 247.

¹⁰ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xvi.

thought her interpretation of Hegel and Marx was outrageous.”¹¹ That initial divergency did not stop him and, possibly, rather nourished a philosophical eros that accompanied Bernstein until the very end of his life. His last book, excluding the posthumous *The Vicissitudes of Nature*, is indeed *Why Read Hannah Arendt now* (2018), which has been one of his most successful books, with three reprints and many foreign translations in the first years of its appearance. I should also add that the last time I met with him, in June 2022, a month before his passing, he told me that he wanted to go to his most beloved Adirondacks house, and while we were chatting, he kept asking his nurse if she had found that Arendt’s book he had asked for because he really wanted to bring it with him. The first encounter may have been stormy, but that passionate arguing continued until—literally—his last days.

Not less important, however, appeared to be his relationship with students, whom he always tried to guide along the same pattern of romance. This explains why, in 2007, he could still write that “even after more than fifty years of teaching, it is still a thrill to enter the classroom.”¹² The encounter with the new in Bernstein’s romance with philosophy was indeed nourished by the constant appearance of new philosophical friends and yearly cohorts of new philosophy students. This, in turn, explains why Bernstein could declare himself a ‘teacher-scholar,’ namely someone who derived as much satisfaction from teaching as he did from writing.¹³

How Bernstein lived the “romance of philosophy” is there for everybody to read: in his books, in his friends and in his students. In the remainder of these remarks, I would like to focus on how that romance may have unfolded for the ‘teacher-scholar,’ had death not come on 4 July 2022.

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In the last few years, Dick repeatedly spoke to me about his ‘discovery of Spinoza’ and asked me to teach a class together on Spinoza’s *Ethics*. During my Fall 2019 class on Spinoza, Dick indeed came a few times as a guest, and we finally agreed to teach a class together as soon as the pandemic would have made a return to in-person teaching possible. Why Spinoza, after so many years of pragmatism, Hegelianism and Marxism? What was Spinoza offering at the time that he could not find in the

¹¹ Bernstein, “The Romance of Philosophy,” 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113.

pragmatist understanding of nature? It was right after the death of Yirmiyahu Yovel that Dick's interest for Spinoza, the 'Marrano of reason,' clearly peaked in our discussions. In this case, one may be tempted to say, it was not the appearance of new friends, but rather the disappearance of old ones that led Dick to new vistas, the emergence of a problem, or thinker, that was, in this case, not new in itself, but only in his romance. The thinker was indeed Spinoza and the problem that of naturalism. The book on *The Vicissitudes of Nature: from Spinoza to Freud*—a book that accompanied the last few years of Dick's life, a book that, even on his deathbed, he cared so much for as to recommend his children to make sure his research assistant would follow its publication—carries indeed the dedication: "In memory of my friend and colleague Yirmiyahu Yovel, whose writings on Spinoza and the Marranos inspired this book."¹⁴ Indeed, not just Spinoza, but also the Marranos, those Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism but kept practicing Judaism in secret and whose habit of practicing a religion while believing in another often resulted in losing faith in both.

On the occasion of the 2019 conference commemorating the death of Yovel, a conference that Dick passionately cherished and organized, he invited me to give a talk on Yovel's interpretation of Spinoza. I accepted the invitation and gave a talk titled "Marrano of Reason" during which I suggested that, particularly for his interpretation of the idea of the eternity of the mind in Spinoza, Yovel, too, like Spinoza, was a Marrano of reason.¹⁵ Dick liked the lecture and asked me to send it to him again after the conference, which I did. We met, as usual, to discuss it and what appeared to be particularly exciting for him was Spinoza's eccentric mixture of a naturalist attitude, a radical philosophy of immanence and an equally passionate defense of the 'eternity of the mind.' The passage in question reads: "The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal."¹⁶ Yovel, whose life and death we commemorated in that conference, offered in my view the best philosophical explanation of this strange sentence, which many commentators have either neglected or even dismissed as an unmotivated disaster: why indeed ruin the beautifully geometric elimination of any transcendent perspective, with that "something" of eternity? This question intrigued both of us and had been at the center of Yovel's work on Spinoza. Turning to Spinoza was perhaps a way for Bernstein to mourn his friend and colleague. The new—Dick's interest for the

¹⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *The Vicissitudes of Nature* (Hoboken: Polity Press, 2022).

¹⁵ See the special issue containing the papers presented at the Symposium and forthcoming in the *Graduate Philosophy Journal*.

¹⁶ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Books, 1996), EV P23.

Marrano of reason and the new book on naturalism—had come out of the old. With our Spinoza class, we would have brought that to a new co-taught class on Spinoza.

But, in the meanwhile, something else was coming out of Dick's own classroom. Bernstein had been teaching classes on pragmatism since his Yale years. Most of the classes he taught on this subject at the New School fell into two categories: "Classical American Pragmatism," focusing on Pierce, James, Dewey (and at times Mead), and "Contemporary Pragmatism," focusing on Sellars, Rorty, Putnam, Brandom, and Habermas. When we met in May 2021 to celebrate his birthday at my home, he told me his teaching on pragmatism had changed. Now, he not only included the above-mentioned thinkers, but also all the women and people of color who are usually left out of the pragmatist canon but should rightfully be included. As I prepared these remarks, I asked our administrative assistant Despina Dantas to give me access to Dick's pragmatism syllabi, and indeed the class he taught in the last few years was no longer divided into "classical" and "contemporary" pragmatism but was simply called "American pragmatism." As a side remark, we may here remember that "classical" and "class" derive from the same Latin word *classis*, a term initially simply meaning any class, but, progressively, and particularly through the French term *classique*, coming to denote whatever belongs to *the* class par excellence. "Classical pragmatism" means, therefore, the authors who have come to constitute a class, or to quote Sylvia Wynter, "the ethno-class of Man," with its overrepresentation.¹⁷ Since 2021, Dick's teaching was no longer referring to any "classical" canon, but to "American pragmatism" in general. The Spring 2021 syllabus carries the following course description:

This seminar will focus on the writings of three classical American Pragmatist: Charles s. Pierce, Willian James, and John Dewey. We will also read selections from Richard Rorty and Black and Women Writers who were influenced by and/or influenced the Pragmatic tradition, Including Jane Addams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Ruth Putnam, Cornel West, and E. Glaude.

In that very spring, we had exchanged favors by reading and commenting on each other's books in progress. Dick sent me his Spinoza chapter, which I had read and commented on. He thanked me for those comments and suggested he was going to change a few things. I, in turn, had sent him not just a chapter but an entire book, and, what is worse, one that was not even in his direct field of competence:

¹⁷ Sylvia Winter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparallel Catastrophe for Our Species," in *Sylvia Winter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Anarchafeminism. And yet, the earliest formulation of the ideas exposed in that book were presented in a keynote lecture for a conference in his honor, the 2nd Annual “Thinking the Plural: Richard J. Bernstein Symposium” (Muhlenberg College, September 25, 2015) and, in a subsequent version, as Thesis Eleven Annual Lecture (La Trobe University, Melbourne, July 26, 2016). I started thinking about that book even earlier than that, but the key idea came to me in 2015 while preparing the lecture for the Richard J. Bernstein Symposium: as I pondered over the meaning of the “plural” in Bernstein’s work, I realized that, in my long-standing engagement with Spinoza’s philosophy, I was actually trying to find an ontological framework that would allow me to think the plural in a similar way, but through a feminist lens. Marcia Morgan, one of the most brilliant of Dick’s students, who had become herself a feminist philosopher, invited me to give that lecture and sparked that conversation on pluralism and naturalism. Is nature good or bad for a feminist cause? Can we rethink bodies in a naturalist framework by avoiding any essentialism or cartesian anxieties? There is more of the relationship between the Spinozist philosophy of transindividuality I developed in that book and pragmatism that I need to explore in the future. But the key thinker that unified our two books-in-progress was indeed Spinoza, and the key problem that of how to combine naturalism and pluralism. Yet, he only asked me to comment on one chapter, while I gave him a book of almost 300 pages. It was winter 2021, the publishing of the book had been delayed so much by the pandemic, but now the publisher was finally back on track, so they had asked me to quickly send them the last version, and I needed somebody to give me rigorous and exhaustive feedback, somebody able to comment even the smallest footnote with intelligence, generosity and, if needed, ‘friendly criticism.’ Who else, in the middle of our semester, would have given me such an incredible gift, within the span of a “two weeks deadline”? Dick, of course, “the best of friends.” He loved the book, especially the chapters on the Spinozist philosophy of transindividuality, and told me that he had learned a lot by reading it. He was particularly impressed by the effort to go beyond the classical philosophical canon, read outside of the tradition, and bring in authors who are usually left out of the conversation: “truly without a banister!” he said by paraphrasing Arendt and with a smile.

It was on the same evening of May 2021, while celebrating his birthday, that we discussed the question of pluralism in philosophy, which means not only the plurality of the different opinions but also, as I suggested, that of the bodies involved. He said that he was still very busy with his naturalism book but had started to think about another book on pragmatism, coming out of recent classes he had been teaching, a

book that would explore how pragmatism itself changes when one adopts a more expansive version of it. We even discussed the title: something like “Pragmatism Revised,” he said, or even, as I suggested, “Pragmatism Unbound.” He nodded and took another slice of garlic and heavy cream quiche. His health was already declining and he had to move with a cane now. But he kept savoring life, ideas and every dish we had prepared with the same ‘gusto’ as ever before. At the end of the dinner, he expressed a wish: “that we will all be here again next year to celebrate another birthday together.”

Indeed, he made it. But his health was too fragile for another feast. And yet, even in 2022, he did not stop teaching, talking to friends and exploring new vistas. In spring 2022, he taught a graduate version of his new pragmatism class. Its course description recites:

This seminar will focus on the writings of three classical American Pragmatists: Charles s. Pierce, Willian James, and John Dewey. We will also read selections from Richard Rorty and Black and Women Writers who were influenced by and/or influenced the Pragmatic tradition, Including Nancy Fraser, Susan Dieleman, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Cornel West.

We may notice that he had now added Nancy Fraser and Susan Dieleman to the list of “new vistas” (certainly not that “new” given the admiration he had always expressed for his former student Nancy Fraser). He also dropped Jane Addams, Ruth Putnam, and E. Glaude. We may also notice the same choice of terms to classify these thinkers: while the first three are called “pragmatists,” the others, as in the 2021 edition, are termed “writers,” indicating, perhaps, that they are not “philosophers” because all too often excluded from the philosophical canon? One may insist that by not calling them simply “philosophers,” let alone just “pragmatists,” he may have replicated the same exclusionary gesture, but one may also notice, instead, that we all have our blinders, and instead of policing those of others, we should be inspired by our friends’ attempts to shake theirs off.

In spring 2022, while teaching that class, Dick was in and off the hospital. He taught even with the oxygen mask on. In a beautiful memory, shared during the inauguration of the Richard J. Bernstein Library in the Philosophy Department,¹⁸ his

¹⁸ This is a Library we created in the Philosophy Department of the New School with Dick’s books. As he approached his retirement, Dick was planning to vacate his office and donate books to his

granddaughter Maya Bernstein-Schalet told me how Dick kept asking her to bring him texts to the hospital. During one of those visits, she had brought some pickles and an article on black feminist pragmatism. His body was at that point so frail that he was not allowed to eat salty pickles, so they decided to share and have only half of one while reading the essay in question.

In his 1971 *Praxis and Action*, Bernstein wrote: “The time is ripe for philosophers to take off the blinders that have prevented them from learning from each other and escape the provincialism that has cramped philosophizing in the recent past.”¹⁹ Dick never stopped doing that, even when his body was so fragile that he could only afford half a pickle. Even then, the romance of philosophy continued—the excitement of “unexplored vistas,” “the sudden perception of half-disclosed and half-hidden possibilities.”²⁰

I last visited him on Sunday 5 June 2022. He was very weak, and I could feel the end was near. I brought him a copy of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Since we had been discussing death in Spinoza, I talked to him about what seemed to me the similarities between Spinoza’s philosophy and the approach to death of Tibetan Buddhism, and how useful I had found that book while assisting my dying mother in those months. I still think everybody should read that book because death is the only thing that is certain for each of us and yet we know so little about the natural process itself and we are so unprepared for it: Spinoza gave us the general framework for thinking about death, but *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* describes the process itself step by step, thereby offering helpful tips on how to navigate it. Furthermore, that book seemed to me to address the same Spinozist dilemma of how to combine a philosophy of immanence, with its rejection of the immortality of the soul, with the strange idea of “the eternity of the mind.” Dick told me he was going to read it and take it with him to the Adirondacks, and that he looked forward to continuing our

colleagues in the Department. When Dick told me to get into his office and see if there were any books I wanted, I entered it but was not able to take any of them: while seeing all his books in front of me, I felt that those books contained his philosophy, they were his workshop, so to speak, and should therefore not be dismembered but kept as a unit. I therefore suggested to my colleagues that we could create a “Richard J. Bernstein Library” in our Department, and everybody enthusiastically agreed, Dick included. Although Dick did not live long enough to see it, whenever we walk into the department all of his books are there to welcome us in the same way in which he welcomed all of us to the department (literally so, since Richard Bernstein hired all of the current members of the New School Philosophy Department).

¹⁹ Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 305.

²⁰ Bernstein, “The Romance of Philosophy,” 118.

conversation in the fall. He also added that he still had on his table a copy of Spinoza's statement: "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death."²¹

He talked a lot about death that day and he was incredibly sovereign about that. He spoke of his life as a fulfilled one, with a sense of resilience (he repeated twice that he had just checked the proofs of his last book) but also acceptance (whenever his wife Carol anxiously told me about her worries for his health, he kept repeating how full his life had been). Those words, "full" and "fulfilled" life, pronounced by an emaciated, almost empty body, resonated for days in me. They still do. And I still keep thinking about Weber's opposition between the full-filled life of the peasant and the always unfinished task of the modern intellectual. Nature *versus* culture, the body *versus* the mind: Weber, in contrast to Spinoza, was not a philosophical monist, and, in contrast to Bernstein, did not end his life with a book on "the vicissitudes of nature" and a philosophy of immanence.

We may conclude by remembering that "immanence" derives from the Latin term *manere*, which means to stay, to remain. That is why Spinoza could combine his rejection of the immortality of the soul, a geometrically clear philosophy of immanence, with the theory of the eternity of the mind. Dick's friends and students will continue to teach the classes he wanted to teach and write the books he wanted to write. Newborns will continue to bring in new vistas, and new problems. Whether by opening one of his books in the Bernstein library or by reading one of his many works, Dick's romance of philosophy will continue through other means and, in this sense, there is something of his mind that is eternal and that will remain even after the dissolution of his body.

²¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, E IV, P 67.

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